



***Still* Left Holding the Bag**

Plastic Packaging In Canada's Grocery Stores, 2 Years Later

October 23, 2024

Two years after our survey of 54 high-traffic grocery stores across Canada found that nearly two-thirds of products in key departments were packaged in plastic, we sent auditors back to 13 stores from four major grocery chains in the Toronto area to see if anything had changed. To our great disappointment, what we found is even more single-use plastic packaging on the shelves.

KEY FINDINGS

Categories	2022 Packaged in plastic	2024 Packaged in plastic	Less plastic ... or more?
Baby Food	76%	82.5%	+6.5%
Produce	71%	70%	-1%
Soups	35%	41%	+6%
All surveyed items	64%	64.5%	+0.5%

- Plastic packaging has jumped by 6 per cent on the baby food and soup shelves since the first audit.
- Plastic packaging still dominates in the produce section, wrapping 70 per cent of all items. There was a slight increase in the amount of unwrapped produce, which rose from 27 per cent in 2022 to 29 per cent in 2024. Empire and Metro’s chains led the way in unpackaged fruits and vegetables, at 38 per cent and 36 per cent respectively. Loblaw had the lowest proportion of unwrapped produce at only 17.8 per cent.
- Despite promises by retailers to reduce the amount of non-recyclable single-use plastic packaging, only 14 per cent of the packaging found in the audit is widely recycled in Canada. The vast majority is destined for landfills or waste incinerators, if it is not littered directly into the environment.
- **NEW for 2024:** We audited multi-pack beverages in 2024 to gauge the impact of the federal ban on six-pack rings that came into effect in June. We found 38 per cent of soft drink six- and eight-packs held together with plastic wrap – a regrettable replacement for six-pack rings.



Since we published our 2022 audit, the federal government announced its intention to require major grocery chains, including the four that are featured in our audit – Loblaw, Empire, Metro and Walmart, to design and implement a plan to reduce single-use plastic food packaging.¹ If implemented, Canada’s largest grocery retailers would be required to set targets for bulk sales, plastic-free packaging, and refillable packaging for food products. This proposal is part of the federal government’s strategy to eliminate plastic waste by 2030,² a deadline that is looming ever closer.

As we noted in the original report, the grocers themselves have made voluntary commitments related to single-use plastic packaging. Our updated audit results suggest that grocers have made virtually no progress on eliminating throwaway plastic packaging from key food product shelves, even after being called out by the federal government.

This year’s audit gathered more detail on the type of plastic packaging found on the shelves we studied. The results show that the vast majority – 84 per cent – is material that, although sometimes accepted in curbside recycling programs, is not recycled in practice into new products. This includes stand-up pouches, bags – including those made out of mesh –

film wrap, and foam trays. Only 16 per cent of the packaging was clear or white rigid plastic that is widely accepted in curbside recycling collection programs and actually processed by recyclers.

The increased use of plastic packaging for baby food and soups heightens concerns about human – and particularly baby and toddler – exposure to chemical additives commonly found in plastic packaging, including phthalates and bisphenols. These chemicals, used in processing and packaging of foods and linked to cancer or reproductive harm, are commonly found in human blood, urine, placenta, breast milk and hair samples. What’s more, thousands of chemicals used in food packaging are not even systematically monitored in humans,³ rendering plastic food contact packaging a type of Russian roulette for long-term population health.

Canada’s five major grocery retailers – Loblaw, Metro, Empire, Walmart and Costco – have the market power to drive changes across the food supply chain to eliminate throwaway plastic packaging. They also have the money to invest in more sustainable packaging models that eliminate waste and harmful chemicals while delivering

Replacing Six-Pack Rings

The federal government’s ban on six-pack rings came into effect in June 2024. The ban was necessary, as these flexible but durable plastic bands can be very harmful and even deadly to wildlife when littered in the environment. Given that the goal is to reduce plastic waste and pollution, it doesn’t make sense to replace the rings with a different type of flexible plastic. And yet, our audit found that more than one-third (38 per cent) of six- and eight-packs of beverages were held together by plastic film. The overall percentage of multi-packs wrapped in film – including larger packs and drink boxes – was 37 per cent. The federal government must put a stop to this regrettable shift in packaging and eliminate “secondary” film packaging used to create multi-packs of already-packaged goods. Some alternatives are right there on the shelf, including paperboard rings or no secondary packaging at all.

environmental and economic benefits. However, the retail sector has not only fallen short of its own voluntary commitments to reduce single-use plastic food packaging, it has actively lobbied against federal requirements.⁴ This suggests we cannot wait for the highly profitable major retail chains to act without being required to do so.

Action to eliminate plastic food packaging is supported across Canada. Polling conducted this summer by Abacus Data indicates that at least 80 per cent of people in every region of the country support a move by grocery retailers to eliminate unnecessary plastic packaging. In line with the government's proposed pollution prevention plan, unwrapping robust fruits and vegetables that come in their own natural packaging (starting with bananas, coconuts, citrus fruits, carrots, potatoes and onions), and introducing refill systems for food and other products that do require packaging are moves that are long overdue.





RECOMMENDATIONS

Federal action needed on plastic food packaging:

1. Ban single-use plastic packaging materials that are not recycled at scale and have no prospect of effective and safe recycling, including overwrap for multi-packs, stand-up pouches, mesh bags and foam packaging.
2. Finalize the Pollution Prevention Plan notice for major grocery retailers that requires targets for refillable packaging by 2030.
3. Ban groupings of hazardous chemicals from plastic packaging and products, including bisphenols, phthalates, heavy metals, forever chemicals (PFAS), and UV stabilizers.

Retailers must move to eliminate single-use plastic packaging and protect the public from harmful chemical additives in packaging:

1. Stop lobbying against industry-wide requirements to eliminate throwaway plastic packaging.
2. Begin implementing a pollution prevention plan for food plastic packaging by:
 - Eliminating packaging for produce wherever possible
 - Eliminating plastic packaging from at least 95 per cent of produce by 2028
 - Implementing systems in order to reach 25 per cent reusable/refillable food packaging by 2030
3. Eliminate the use of plastic packaging for foods marketed to babies and toddlers.

METHODOLOGY

Environmental Defence commissioned Merchandising Consultants Associates (MCA) to return to 13 stores owned by four major grocery retailers – Loblaw, Empire, Metro and Walmart – in August 2024. Due to the lack of regional variability we found across these major chains in our 2022 audit and to avoid unnecessary travel, the stores selected for the update are all in the Toronto area, where MCA is located. The updated audit reported here focused on three key departments: produce, baby food and soups. The beverage aisle was added in 2024 to assess how multi-packs of beverages are being bundled.



ENDNOTES

1. Government of Canada, "Consultation Document: Pollution Prevention Planning Notice for Primary Food Packaging," April 2023:
<https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/corporate/transparency/consultations/consultation-pollution-prevention-planning-notice-primary-food-plastic-packaging.html>.
A final notice has not yet been published.
2. See
<https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/managing-reducing-waste/reduce-plastic-waste/canada-action.html>
3. Geueke, B., Parkinson, L.V., Groh, K.J. et al. Evidence for widespread human exposure to food contact chemicals. J Expo Sci Environ Epidemiol (2024).
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41370-024-00718-2>
4. See
<https://www.retailcouncil.org/advocacy/ongoing-advocacy-proposed-federal-pollution-prevention-planning-p2-notice/>
5. See
<https://environmentaldefence.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/EDC-OMNI-Plastic-Polling-July-2024.pdf>

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